Designing for Focus Work

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• Discover how the physical workplace can influence (hinder or enhance) human performance and its major impact on the bottom line.

• Learn how individual concentration or focus works through exploring interesting factoids on human cognition, including attention, distraction and whether multitasking is productive or not.

• Explore why focus work is important even for collaboration and why it is good business to design for both.

• Apply five key design elements to create a high-performance workplace where people can thrive.
Agenda

INTRODUCTION
  Why focus work is important

THE ANATOMY OF FOCUS WORK
  Attention
  Distraction
  Multitasking
  Flow & Situational Awareness

DESIGNING FOR FOCUS WORK
  Holistic design approach with five key elements

SUMMARY

Q & A
Profits are the Bottom Line, Literally

In order to stay profitable, companies need to innovate constantly (or risk becoming irrelevant).

Innovation is a team sport - collaboration is key

But just collaboration won’t get you there!
Focus Work - Working Definition

“Paying close attention to something while controlling stimuli”
Collaboration = Interactive Group Work + Individual Focused Tasks

“When focus is compromised in pursuit of collaboration, neither works well.” (Gensler, 2013)
Solution to a Problem: Cost Cutting at an Organization

Preparation for Brainstorming → Brainstorming Ideation → Develop Ideas Analyze Facts → Present Facts Comparison Elimination → Conduct Feasibility Studies → Pick Solution(s) Group Consensus
Solution to a Problem: Cost Cutting at an Organization

1. Brainstorming
2. Ideation
3. Present Facts
4. Comparison
5. Elimination
6. Pick Solution(s)
7. Group Consensus
Collaboration and Focus Work Go Hand in Hand
Levels of Focus Work

- Email correspondence
- Reading a report
- Writing a proposal
- Meetings
- Brainstorming
- Building a presentation
- Studying for an exam
- Expense reporting
- Online research
- Crafting a contract
Need for Focus Does Not Depend on Job Types

Time spent doing quiet work at one’s workstation (Haworth, 2006):

Engineers: 64%
Professionals: 62%
Admins: 61%
Managers: 48%
Most Significant Factor in Workplace Effectiveness: Individual Focus Work (*not* Collaboration)

Yet, focus is the work environment’s least effectively supported activity!

Time spent on focus work has increased: 48% (2008) → 55% (2012)
Criticality of focus work has increased: 85% (2008) → 88% (2012)

*Source: Gensler, 2012 Workplace Survey “What we’ve learned about focus in the workplace.”*
Collaboration is Emphasized Nowadays

Open offices = collaboration + real estate savings (WIN-WIN)
...are we missing something?
Distractions Can Sabotage Focus Work

On average, office workers lose 28% of their productive time due to interruptions and distractions.

= 2 hours a day or over 11 hours a week!

It’s the People that Matter!
Productivity Loss: 28%  |  RE Cost Savings: 50%

Overall effect on cost of doing business over 10-year period:

28% of 82% = 34% waste

50% of 5% = 2.5% gain
Cost to Individual Performance > Benefits of Collaborative Group Work
So What’s the Solution: Back to Private Offices?

Wait! That would hurt collaboration!
Holistic Workplace Design that Effectively Enables Both Collaboration and Focus Work
The Anatomy of Focus Work
Knowledge Work...

Involves cognition (mental processes) that can be divided into several functions that underlie optimal human performance:

- Sensation and perception (via our five senses)
- **Attention** (such as focus work)
- Working memory (including short term memory storage)
- Long term memory (such as learning)
Attention...

Choosing to be aware of and to concentrate on something specific, while *ignoring* other information (such as distractions).

The allocation of *limited* processing resources.
Attentional Control...

An individual’s capacity to choose what they pay attention to and what they ignore.

It's also the individual's ability to concentrate.

*Two kinds:*

- Selective auditory attention (or selective hearing)
- Selective visual attention (spotlight analogy)
Paivio’s Dual Coding Theory

Processing images - stimuli: inspiring (e.g. designer, architect)

Processing words - stimuli: distracting (e.g. lawyer, writer)
Distraction...

Divided attention from the chosen object of attention onto the source of distraction.

*Can come from:*

- External sources (e.g. overheard conversations or music)
- Internal sources (e.g. multitasking or lack of interest)
Recovery Time from Distraction

Average: 25 min

- Interruption Point
- External Interruption: 23 min
- Internal Interruption: 30 min
And the No.1 Distraction of ALL time is...

Irrelevant, Intelligible Speech.

Perhaps because sound is not visible, we tend to underestimate its importance. For instance, if water were leaking into a space rather than distracting sound, the building manager would be ‘on it’ immediately! Sound leaks can be just as damaging to workplace function, but we are expected to dismiss them much more readily than a soggy carpet! We dismiss acoustic distraction at the expense of worker effectiveness...

- GSA Public Buildings Service, 2012
Hearing

The sentinel of senses
Omnidirectional
Always on 24/7, day or night, bright or dark
Can never be turned off
How to Beat Distractions, Boost Concentration and Stay Focused...

Prioritize tasks
Corral your email
Limit other distractions
Break tasks into chunks
Work in the same location
Work offline
Turn off the world
Find a quite place to work
Set a timer
Declutter your work space

Plan your days
Control your work environment
Use relaxation techniques
Take notes
Maintain a routine
Try an app
Wear headphones
Take little breaks
Surround yourself w/ organized people
Try caffeine

How to Focus

9 STEPS TO FOCUS

How To Stay FOCUSED:
#1 - Eliminate Distractions
#2 - Your Focus Is Like a Muscle - Train It
#3 - Do It First Thing In The Morning
#4 - Have A Plan
#5 - Take Regular Breaks
The Common Themes

Company Culture  
*(Organizational Performance)*

Work Environment  
*(Facility Performance)*

Self Discipline  
*(Human Performance)*
Self Discipline and Supportive Work Environment

The top ingredient for effective focus work is self-discipline.

However, it is a whole lot easier if the work environment is supportive.
Multitasking

...intentionally attempting to perform two or more tasks simultaneously.
The Million Dollar Question: Is Multitasking Possible?

According to Multiple Resource Theory (MRT):

- Only if the tasks performed are in separate processing stages
  (e.g. perceptual activities vs. response selection)

- Or involve different processing mechanisms
  (e.g. spatial vs. verbal)

According to the Theory of Automaticity (James, 1890):

- Only if they are habitual, involving minimal consciousness
  ("autopilot mode")
Task Switching...

...rather than multitasking!

Tuning the radio *OR* paying full attention to driving

Allocating segments of time to each task in turn

It’s just another form of distraction since attention must be divided among the multiple tasks.
Parallel Processing - Only Computers (with Multiple Processors)
Task Switching

We, humans are stuck with “task switching” (and have been for the last 30,000 years!)
Perhaps if we had Multiple “Processors” or Multiple Brains...

Octopuses have multiple brains, one for each tentacle!

They can control each one separately through a central brain.

They excel at multitasking!
Flow

A mental state that occurs when we are fully immersed in an activity:

- Focusing on a physical task
- Focusing on a mental task
- Feeling fully focused, fully involved and energized
Flow - Matching Skill Sets with Challenge Levels

(Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi)
Characteristics of Flow

Completely involved in what we are doing - focused, concentrated

A sense of ecstasy - or being outside every day reality

Great inner clarity - knowing what needs to be done, and how well we are doing (immediate feedback)

Knowing that the activity is doable - that our skills are adequate for the task

A sense of serenity - no worries about oneself, and a feeling of growing beyond the boundaries of the ego

Timelessness - thoroughly focused on the present, hours seem to pass by in minutes

Intrinsic motivation - whatever produces flow becomes its own reward

(M. Csikszentmihalyi)
The Environment is Important When Getting into Flow

However, *once in flow*, focus is so intense, that the environment becomes irrelevant and time flies by.
Situational Awareness

Being aware of what is happening around us (e.g. light is red) and understanding what the information means for our current task (must stop).
Flow vs. Situational Awareness

Camera lens analogy: telephoto vs. wide angle lens
Flow and Situational Awareness

Today’s work environment requires:

- High situational awareness (e.g. not missing an important email)

  and

- Being in the flow (e.g. coming up with creative ideas)

- The two cannot be achieved at the same time
- Need to alternate between the two states
- Physical environment must support both
How do We Design for All These?

The Conventional Recipe

Ingredients:
- 1 tbs High enclosure
- 2 lbs Low density, away from disruptive noises
- 1 cup High levels of acoustical treatments

Prep time: TOO LONG!
Cost: A LOT!
Yields: INFLEXIBILITY!
Need a Holistic Design Approach

Designing for:

- **Focus work** (both flow and situational awareness)
- and
- **Collaboration**
Systems Thinking

Designing for Focus: Five Themes

- Provide a great **variety** of work settings
- Give people the **choice** over where, how, and when they work
- Give employees **control** over their work environment
- Create a **legible** and clutter-free work environment
- Provide appropriate space for **recharging**
Variety - the Key to Satisfy All Needs

Instead of “either/or” design for “and.”
Choice - the Key to Empower Employees

Let employees choose where, when and how they work.

 Examples:

 Free address
 (provides the choice of where)

 Activity Based
 (provides the choice of where and how)

 Holistic Mobility Program
 (provides the choice of where, how and when)
Control - the Key to Flexibility

Let workers have control over their work environment.

Sometimes it means to move to a different workspace temporarily, or working from home.

*Earthquake analogy*
Legibility - the Key to Avoid Frustration

Design legible layouts and keep workstations clutter-free.
Recharging - the Key to Re-Focus

Give employees time and appropriate spaces for breaks.

- Ergonomic seating
- Adjustable height desks
- Views to outdoors (preferably nature) for micro-breaks
- Kitchen area with healthy snacks
- Clean, comfortable restrooms
- Lounge area for socializing
- Walking meetings
- Gym
In Summary

 Interruptions aren’t going away - in fact, we’ll probably need to deal with even more.

Open and interactive spaces are needed for collaboration.

Such spaces introduce distractions.

Distractions sabotage focus.

Focus is also necessary for collaboration.

*Vicious circle?*
In Summary

The traditional private offices as sole option for focus work has no longer been practical.

But recent, collaborative/open offices don’t work, either.

New approach needed that addresses both collaboration and focus work.

It includes applying Systems Thinking and using all five key design elements, providing employees with:

- **Variety** of space types and work locations
- **Choice** over where, how and when to best work
- **Control** over environmental elements to manage distractions
- A **legible** and clutter-free work environment
- Spaces for people to get away and **recharge**